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THE COMMUNITY CENTER MOVEMENT AS A MORAL FORCE.

C. J. BUSHNELL.

THE motto of the United States—*E Pluribus Unum*—is to-day becoming the motto of the world,—not, perhaps, so much by the will of the diplomats as by the will of the people. Humanity is sick of disunion, and is more and more deliberately endeavoring to “form a more perfect union.” What this ideal of union means in concrete detail we as yet, of course, only vaguely understand; but we are progressively achieving it. This achievement we are learning to call democracy. Of the innumerable concerted efforts to this end at the present time, next to the League of Nations, perhaps the most significant is the community center movement. And it is so precisely because it is a concerted, intelligent effort for the solution of the central problem of morality,—the promotion of social union.

In America we are inclined to flatter ourselves unduly on our efficiency and general welfare. The war has opened our eyes to some of the facts of serious social waste among us. For example, recent surveys have shown that one third of our men of military age are unfit for military service; 3,000,000 of our children in the United States are continuously undernourished; 10,000,000 persons of the country are in chronic poverty; one half of our men do not receive incomes sufficient to support an average-sized workingman's family (about five) in physical efficiency; the income of the average wage-earner is hardly one half the market value he adds to the product on which he works; one half of our business firms go to the wall every thirty years; and a person dies from unnecessary cause in the United States every minute. The following disorders have for some time been increasing,—apparently faster than the population: strikes, child labor (?), child delin-

quency, murders, suicides, lynchings, robberies, divorces, and insanity. We are beginning to feel that these are unnecessary and irrational conditions of disunion, causing billions of dollars of waste every year.¹

During the last decades a growing public consciousness of these conditions and of their meaning has been a strong influence in producing the modern community center movement. This started partly as an instinctive impulse toward further social solidarity, and partly as a deliberate effort to bridge the widening chasm between social classes,—particularly through the social settlements,—in Jane Addams words, “To add the social (fellowship) function to democracy,”—to help all classes to overcome invidious and abnormal class distinctions, and participate freely and effectively in all of society’s elementary social functions: those of maintenance, learning, control and play. To be sure, not all the efforts for community union were as democratic, conscious and impartial as this. The number, variety and persistence of them, however, is an impressive evidence of the growing strength of the movement. Even earlier, the Grange movement in the rural communities and the labor unions in the cities were “get-together” efforts, broadening out in recent years into a tremendous, voluntary, unco-ordinated development of industrial co-operation, industrial welfare work, organized charities, institutional churches, public playgrounds, public libraries, public forums, civic associations, neighborhood clubs, social centers, school and home gardens, parent-teachers’ associations, the Christian associations, Boy Scouts, Campfire Girls, art associations, music organizations, and public, municipal enterprises of a hundred different kinds for assisting communities to more conscious, co-operative life.

¹ For full and careful statistical discussions on these points consult: King, *Wealth and Income of the People of the United States*; Hunter, *Poverty*; Parmelee, *Poverty and Social Progress*; Lauk and Sydenstricker, *Conditions of Labor in American Industries*; Koester, *The Price of Inefficiency*, especially pp. v-xxiv of the last.

In the last four or five years both students of this movement and intelligent citizens generally have begun to feel keenly not only its extreme importance, but also its wastefulness of effort, through duplications, disorganization, haphazard finance and unscientific methods.

Perception of this situation, and at the same time the pressure of the war for more effective union, have produced recently several very significant agencies for introducing comprehension, order and science into the movement. Consider a few of these in the United States.

Before the war,—in October, 1911,—at Madison, Wisconsin, was held the first national conference on social centers, promoting the development of the American Social Center Association, of which the late Josiah Strong was elected president. This meeting emphasized the wider community use of the public schools, and was addressed by Woodrow Wilson in a speech heartily commending the idea.

With our entrance into the war, the Playground and Recreation Association of America, which had for some ten years been doing a notable service for community welfare through the promotion of play centers, was asked by the Federal War and Navy Departments to help in organizing entertainment for the soldiers in the communities near their camps. This War Camp Community Service, consisting of home hospitality, dances, athletic meets, community sings, concerts, church socials, automobile rides and many other forms of good fellowship, not only awakened remarkable public spirit in many communities, but also revealed new possibilities and methods of community organization.

In this connection it is worthy of note that we are now spending on organized, uncommercialized public playgrounds and other recreation centers in the United States in the neighborhood of \$10,000,000 a year; about 1,000,000 persons are in daily attendance, in over 500 cities, at nearly 5,000 playgrounds, more than 200 public bathing beaches and 300 swimming pools,—nearly all with trained attendants and play leaders. It is significant that over 300 cities

have now wholly or in part assumed municipal control and support of these public recreational facilities, and the tendency in this direction is rapidly increasing. Nearly 100 cities maintain training classes for recreation workers, with probably more than 3,000 students; and in many of these cities recreation positions are now filled by civil service examinations.²

Perhaps even more significant is the fact that, since the close of war, a nation-wide movement has arisen for the construction of community center buildings as memorials for the soldiers and for the cause of human freedom. At the present writing this movement is enlisting the guidance and support of artists and social workers everywhere.

On April 16, 1916, a national conference on community centers was held in New York, with the late Luther H. Gulick presiding, and John Collier as secretary. A national annual conference organization has been effected, with headquarters in New York,—also a Training School for Community Workers, with Mr. Collier as director, in connection with the People's Institute. The Training School, now in its fifth year, educates its students for the new profession of the "community secretary" and assists in the publication of *The Community Center*, the organ of the National Community Center Conference, to help local groups of the United States and Canada "To organize the people in order that they may use government; to place social science and experts at the disposal of the people."

The underlying principles and methods of the movement are perhaps most clearly exemplified by the Social Unit Plan, developed during the last six or eight years, by experiments in New York, Milwaukee and Cincinnati, chiefly under the leadership of Wilber C. Phillips and Elsie Phillips. Beginning in a community health service, especially for the children, its purpose is "To hasten the coming of a democracy, both genuine and efficient, by

² Cf. Recreation in the First Year of the War, in the *Survey*, Vol. XL, No. 7, p. 196.

building up, on a basis of population units, an organization through which the people can get a clear idea of their common needs, and can utilize the technical knowledge of skilled groups in formulating and carrying out programs to meet those needs." The central principle of the Unit Plan,—as that of the community center movement as a whole,—is to enable every individual clearly to perceive and feel himself to be a factor in the life of the community, and to work intelligently for the whole community at the same time that he is working for himself. This is obviously the highest ideal of morality, the prime condition of peace, and the foundation of democracy. The work has developed out of the growing perception of students and social agents that, with the increasing complexity of our civilization, a closer and more vital relationship must be established between the masses and the experts, between the consumers and the producers, between the people as human beings and the people as vocational workers.

This idea in the winter of 1915, brought together a group in the city of Washington, D. C., and a committee of organization was formed. Realizing that the Unit Plan was "essentially an experiment in democracy, with preventive health work as the point of attack," the committee decided to secure three things: (1) Endorsement of leading social and medical workers; (2) Money support which would go as a gift to the community in which it might be undertaken; (3) the services of national experts as advisers and aids to its execution. In February, 1916, with a considerable fund raised, the National Social Unit Organization was formed, with Gifford Pinchot as its first president; and in November of the same year, at the invitation of the Council of Social Agencies of Cincinnati, that city was selected as the field for the first unit experiment. After the people of Cincinnati had been thoroughly informed of the Plan and a city-wide organization had been developed for counsel and support, \$135,000 were appropriated (two thirds from the national organization and one third from local contributions), and the

Mohawk-Brighton district of the city was chosen in June of 1917, as the special region for the experiment,—“to bring the neighborly advantages of the small town to the city community.”

For this purpose the essential features of the local organization consist of a citizens' council and an occupational council. The former is made up of one representative from each block, elected by a block council which is elected by the people of the block,—each person above 18 having a vote. These block representatives of the citizens' council are the paid general social agents of the district. Their duties are to report the needs of the people to the proper authorities and experts and see that those needs are fulfilled,—whether they be along the lines of health or employment or business or recreation or education, etc. In other words the citizens' council is a continuous census and intelligence system. One worker compares it to the sensory nervous system of the human body. “In the community there is no complete nervous system, so one part of it may be hungry and the rest not feel that there is any need. One part may be diseased and the rest not feel the results until it is too late. One part may be evil and the rest not realize the evil until the lives of its own children have been touched by it. The citizens' council will be the nervous system of the district, knowing whenever there is a need and making that need felt until it is satisfied.” The occupational council, on the other hand, is made up of at least one representative elected from each important vocational group of the community,—as the physicians, the nurses, the teachers, the lawyers, the ministers, the charity agents, the musicians and artists, the business men, the manual workers, etc. The occupational council serves as the motor nervous system of the community to bring its various functional groups into action to meet the needs of all its individuals, as reported and advised by the citizens' council. These two councils meeting regularly in some central building and co-operating through an executive, which they jointly elect, constitute

the local government of the community in all strictly local concerns and help the central authorities of the city on the one hand, and citizens, on the other, to eliminate the present numerous oversights, duplications and conflicts of effort,—and to transform the present hostile class distinctions of special privilege into friendly vocational distinctions of social service. A thorough report by Dr. Devine upon the working of the experiment thus far has recently appeared in the *Survey*.

While the Cincinnati experiment seems to be the most scientifically detailed plan now in operation in the United States for the development of genuine community democracy, there are still other numerous and promising experiments, among which is the Community Clearing House in New York. It has been privately instituted as “a radical experiment in the democratization of all public services, and in the work of training citizens to become parents and brothers of the city. Thirteen city departments co-operate in serving the people within a forty-block area. Through this clearing house, a public agent—a parole officer, or tenement inspector, or visiting nurse—can summon the aid of other public agents or any private charity, can invite the people to confer about needs, can enroll lay citizens for neighborhood social service.”

For all these important community enterprises the public school buildings constitute the most natural and useful material equipment; and in many parts of the country the new buildings are being constructed with these purposes in mind. A typical instance of this use of the schools is that of school 40 in New York. In February, 1917, wageworkers from 700 different garment shops began to use the school as a center. They held their shop meetings in the school rooms, danced in the play grounds, dined together in the corridors every night, and instituted forum work in the auditorium, meeting the expenses out of their own union treasury. This work has rapidly grown into many industrial evening centers in other schools, with a central educational institute at the

Washington Irving High School. In many other parts of the country similar use of the public school is developing.

The recent definite entry of the United States government into the movement, through the Bureau of Education, in part as a wartime necessity, has greatly emphasized the wider use of the public schools as community centers. The slogan of the Bureau in this work, as stated by Henry E. Jackson, special agent in Community Organization, is "Every schoolhouse a community capitol and every community a little democracy." Commissioner P. P. Claxton says, "For this purpose the schoolhouse is specially fitted; it is non-sectarian and non-partisan; the property of no individual, group or clique, but the common property of all; the one place in every community in which all have equal rights and all are equally at home. . . . Here all members of the community may appropriately send themselves to school to each other and learn from each other the things pertaining to the life of the local community, the state, the nation, and the world."³ In commending the movement, President Wilson says, "The creation of community councils is in my opinion making an advance of vital significance. It will, I believe, result when thoroughly carried out in welding the nation together as no nation of any great size has ever been welded before. It will build up from the bottom an understanding and sympathy and unity of purpose and effort. You will find it, I think, not so much a new task as a unification of existing efforts, a fusion of energies now too much scattered and at times somewhat confused into one harmonious and effective power."

In his Ten Commandments for a Community Center, Mr. Jackson says:

- (1) It must guarantee freedom of thought and freedom of its expression.
- (2) It must aim at unity, not uniformity, and accentuate resemblances, not differences.

³ Letter of Transmittal in the book, *A Community Center*, by Henry E. Jackson.

(3) It must be organized democratically, with the right to learn by making mistakes.

(4) It must be free from the domination of money, giving the right of way to character and intelligence.

(5) It must be nonpartisan, nonsectarian, and nonexclusive both in purpose and practice.⁴

These are the key notes of the movement.

The practical lines along which these ideas are now being carried out by the government include within the community center:

(1) A People's University, with classes, lectures, athletics for all.

(2) A Community Capitol, with the public polling place.

(3) A Community Forum, for the courteous and orderly discussion of all questions concerning the common welfare.

(4) A Neighborhood Club, with the passing of the saloon an increasingly important means of healthy, democratic fellowship. To this are being added organizations for music, dramatics and other forms of art, such as the exhibitions of pictures by the American Federation of Arts.

(5) A Home and School League, which is a parent-teachers' association for improving both home and school conditions.

(6) A Community Bank, primarily a co-operative savings bank for both children and adults, but also a loan society.

(7) A Co-operative Exchange, a collective buying and distribution organization for which there is a growing public demand. North Carolina has already passed a law authorizing communities to form such exchanges in the schoolhouses.

(8) "A Red Cross Unit ought to exist as a department of the community center in every school district of the United States."

The organization for carrying forward these plans as suggested by the government consists of three essential parts:

(1) A Community Secretary, elected publicly by the community concerned, as its executive, especially trained for such work.

(2) A Board of Directors, similarly elected, to have both legislative and executive duties, as an occupational council, each member of which is committee chairman or director of one of the special community services of the center.

(3) A Citizens' Committee, or "trouble committee," corresponding somewhat to the citizens' council of the Social Unit Plan,—not to make

⁴loc. cit. p. 65.

trouble but to remove it by finding out the things that most need to be done and developing wise, constructive programs of action, big enough to merit the interest and support of the people.

The movement is thus coming to furnish a simplified machinery for sound social reconstruction, eliminating disturbing class distinctions and enabling layman and expert, consumer and producer, operative and manager effectively to "get together." It is an important, a necessary, means at this time for realizing social union, allaying unrest,—achieving the moral ideals of democracy.

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